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ABSTRACT

Youth were found to be responsive to a survey when asked for solutions to provocatively disruptive situations. The general purpose of this study was to determine whether these expressed solutions have some useful application to the problems of disruption. Description was measured through a situational survey and a self-description form filled out by the student along with a teacher rating of the student's behavior. The situational survey consisted of seven specific situations which were provocatively disruptive in nature, followed by a general question about annoying situations. The solutions to the survey were rated according to clinically oriented criteria of disruption. The results were generally minimal as far as any consistent or outstanding patterns of disruption. Signs of disruption in various solutions were not evident in the teacher's or student's self-index of disruption. It was concluded that the survey was valuable as a probe, leading to pertinent questions. (Author/BW)

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PROBLEM SOLVING BEHAVIOR OF TEENAGERS:

AN INDICATOR FOR CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

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Aim

Youth were found to be responsive to a survey when asked for solutions to provocatively disruptive situations.

The general concern here is whether these expressed solutions have as yet some useful application to the problems of disruption. We asked if the solutions had a bearing on disruption evidenced in the classroom or possibly reflect disruptive attitudes in the teenager's description of himself. In any event the content of youths' solutions to these difficult situations might also be explored for cues to the management of disruption.

Method

We attempted to measure disruption through a situational survey and a self-description form filled out by the student along with a teacher rating each of the student's behavior. The emphasis was on brevity of format to capture the cooperation of all parties involved, and in particular, the disruptive student.

The situational survey consisted of 7 specific situations which were provocatively disruptive in nature, followed by a general question about annoying situations. The situations were selected which were familiar to and had some theoretical relevance for the adolescent. For example, one situation indicated a problem in dealing with parental differences, another about alienation - where an individual can't quite cut it with the group.

(Table or Slide A)

The solutions to the survey were rated according to clinically oriented criteria of disruption, largely taken from symptoms prevalent in the character disordered[1,2,4]. Interrater agreement ran about 80%. The following attributes are roughly summarized and considered indicative of disruptive solutions given by students:

a. exhibiting poor impulse control.
b. distressing toward others rather than one's self.
c. avoiding confrontation of the problem.
d. an unchanging or rigid attitude.

These qualities were also evident in pre-tested solutions given by adolescents. If the solution was very common to a particular problem, it was not considered disruptive, but more a social norm (such as squealing on a student). Hence, disruptive ratings were relatively rare as would be expected also of teacher ratings.

Student self-descriptions were derived from a shorter form of Lanyon's[7] social non-conformity scale on his Psychological Screening Inventory. The students had to check a short list of statements, which were previously validated regarding antisocial, impulsive and acting out behavior.

(Table or Slide B)

Teacher's rating of students was used as an index of classroom behavior. The teacher had to pick 3 words to describe each of their students. This was from a word list that was pre-rated by other teachers as to whether words on the list would or would not be descriptive of the disruptive student.

The teachers then were indirectly and unaware of rating their students as disruptive.

(Table or Slide C)

The sampling of students could afford us some exploration of sex, age and urban status distinctions with regard to disruption. A total of 159 students from 5 junior and 3 freshman classes completed filling out a situational survey, self-description check list and their 7 teachers were asked to rate all their students in a particular section. Present sampling was of 5 suburban and 3 urban classes; a similar number, age and proportion of students were available in the pre-testing with the situational survey.

Findings

Results were generally minimal as far as any consistant or outstanding patterns of disruption.

Signs of disruption in various solutions were not evident in the teacher's nor student's self-index of disruption. There was a trend for more disruptive solutions to be among the more disruptive (rated) students, but not of any consistent significance. The trend was absent when the teenagers were asked about situations involving completing an unclear assignment.

In one situation, disruptive students very clearly gave disruptive solutions when faced with a parental difference in management ($p < .01$). The common solutions here were to deceive a parent or to willfully go ahead without parental permission. (The issue here had to do with late night privileges and no sex differences were found).

It appears then that disruptive students are more sensitive to differences in management and likely to act up. This is consistent with findings among delinquents, where there is a prevalence of authority conflict in the home.

With regard to disruptive solutions to the survey regardless of age, sex or urban status, students responded pretty much the same. In rating themselves, boys* ($p < .02$) and older (junior) students ($P < .01$) showed greater disruption. Also, boys were rated by their teachers as more disruptive than girls ($p < .05$) and a similar trend was noted amongst older students. These are not too surprising in light of the high mental health problems and delinquency rates among adolescent boys; also, the delinquency rates increase with age and peak about 17 years of age.

When the teachers rated their students on the word list, there were some mild variations in style as happens with grading. Some teachers rated more conservatively on disruption than others (yet not significantly different from each other on a general measure). As suggested earlier, the more disruptive students were found with less frequency - "those few troublemakers".

Management Issues

In the survey we asked about a situation which could have direct bearing on classroom management. We asked the teenagers to respond to a situation in which the student was acting tough and the teacher was turned off. We found that students

*With the original scale from Lanyon, similar sex differences are noted.

had some interesting things to say about this disruptive situation which could be instructive in management issues. There solutions seemed particularly noteworthy when the students volunteered an unconventional answer as well as gave reasons for the same.

In a number of instances they gave direct clues on how <u>disruption</u> would <u>persist</u> over a period of time. It is under these classroom conditions that the teacher is most concerned, often her control is threatened; yet the teacher may have time to catch herself and try a different approach. Let's look for a moment at some of the frequent reasons given for continued disruption:

(Table or Slide D)

These themes can certainly alert us to the thinking behind continued disruption, so the teacher can be prepared for the challenge.

Some students (Theme B) suggest even if another person is aware of the act behind disruption, it is not sufficient to stop them. The pointing finger of I-know-what-you-re-doing may therefore not always be effective. There are of course students who are unresponsive to any of our actions and who have to be dealt with in a matter of fact fashion. On the other hand, a larger proportion of students indicate they are responsive to, and in fact anticipate some form of control (Themes A, C & D).

A large number also see the need for some change as a means of managing defiance - a change in the situation, teacher or student. We could just as easily say that time itself can be used as a means of resolving matters. Maybe time or a change is necessary in order to find out about a problem

(Theme C), time to blow off steam, or time to show face (Theme E) as well as time to save face. This is not to be confused with simply dropping matters, but some way of making time or change actively work for us. In some instances we have to move off dead center on an issue in order to move more easily into a solution. We will come back later and expand on the use of time in managing defiance.

There are a variety of specific solutions to the pupil-teacher confrontation problem that can give us cues to classroom management.

a. Attention and Recognition Factors.

Some teenagers picked up on how the teacher reacts as uninvolved and battle for recognition from the teacher. The teacher may not be able to realize this until late in the game. Some students give special focus to gaining attention, saying the pupil in the situation "goes on anyway until he gets everyone's attention including the teacher"; while others see an opposite result: "soon he becomes all alone because his acting tough will make everyone dislike him and the teacher won't care anyway".

In mentioning how people care or notice individuals, the students more often than not, referred to the managing adult and they came up with completely dissimilar reasons for the same act. Further inspection suggests there are many touchy and devious means by which people attempt to be noticed, and what is often a determining factor is how one expects the other person to act. Expectations are usually ground in personal experience and change from time to time so that expectations

have a very tight (odd) and not very universal logic. For example, one youth chose continued defiance as a gesture because he expected the teacher to be apathetic anyhow; yet another student figured if you bug a teacher long enough, she will eventually care. Still another youth expected the teacher to take notice when the heat is off or when the person calms down to normal.

Also from experience, we are often aware of the unproductive efforts of probing for individual needs of attention - a heavily guarded secret for most of us. In a defiant situation, if recognition problems are suspected, one might approach the situation by saying, "you may have your private reasons for being excited at this time and I would be willing to see you alone about them, but now I have to get on with the work to be done in class, etc.". It appears better to divert from any explanation of highly personal needs of recognition and not have them aired directly in the classroom unless there is an easy opportunity to search out the issue honestly on the spot.

Basically, the teacher cannot meet these private needs in the classroom and diversion (away from recognition issues) limits any undue emphasis on or reinforcement of these almost insoluable attention bids.

b. Rejection Factor.

Another solution to the pupil-teacher confrontation problem is to <u>dismiss</u> the pupil as something less than human for acting up in the first place. Usually the youth wrote brief comments of disdain about the tough pupil being "childish, a jerk, a bully," and so on. Like most name calling,

the youth may be trying to avoid a tarnished image. It is as though they were saying, "I'm hopefully not like that" or "he's not one of our crowd". In a struggle for identity teenagers may not be certain of who they are, but will be emphatic as to what they are not.

Also in dismissing the defiant pupil, the teenagers may be saying one doesn't want to be bothered or have one's time wasted with any defiant incident.

When defiance does occur, the teacher may wait for the reactions of the students to work - that they are tired of having their time wasted. It is probably better for the teacher to be aware that other students are turned off than simply being an adult critical of a disruptive student.

As the survey indicates, often defiance can alienate a large number of students in the class. If defiance captures the interest of the class, certainly the reasons for defiance are important enough to be explored.

c. Timing.

To some, a sense of <u>timing</u> seems to afford a solution to a disruptive situation. One adolescent indicated that the pupil will "eventually give up or do something that is out of line or get into trouble"; another commented that the pupil would "continue until someone pointed out the pointlessness of it". Here the youths are saying let matters go, let the events decide, with no particular time of decision. But, as indicated earlier, if a teacher lets matters slide, it could be misconstrued as ignoring individuals or (Theme D) seen as being without opposition and inviting anarchy. When

a teacher can point out openly that a decision cannot be made at a certain moment, her instruction has a keener sense of interest and control.

Also, one's timing or style of handling decisions is important in managing defiant situations. Some individuals, rather than let matters ride would want things to happen quickly. Usually these people can't stand seeing a defiant situation hang fire - get on with it and do something about it - or can just stand so much of defiance and have to get out. From an opposite point of view a teacher may ease a situation by pacing a decision - where she continues her efforts toward a solution but waits out a resolution. She may also plan when she can get a better discussion going. Although hard to achieve in a fast moving society, pacing can deflect a defiant situation.

Sometimes we find the real problem behind a pupil-teacher flareup is that they differ in their timing of efforts. One person wants things to happen more rapidly than the other. In any event, knowing one can have a degree of latitude in how quickly one reaches an ultimate decision, can be an added tool for the teacher. She can also consider in her action whether it is better for events to take their course or to intervene.

in summarizing management issues, by and large students do ask for control; yet there are some for whom the right solution is never right. Just as we have probed into youth's outlook, the teacher, knowing more of what to look for, can and has to explore her individual situation. The teacher's

informed outlook can serve as the best safeguard in the dilemma of defiance.

Additional findings into the nature of disruption.

a. Disruptive Patterns Determined by Teacher Ratings.

There are of course alternate ways of evaluating disruption than through direct survey questions and clinically oriented criteria.

Perhaps it would be more instructive if we found out the problem solving patterns that evolved from individuals rated as disruptive - an operational definition of disruption from the teacher's viewpoint.

When we read about the formal research on the closely related area of character development (see Kolberg[6]), the value of the research is seen in what choices people make or what they do rather than what they say. In the current research the student is tempted by a number of provocative situations to say something disruptive and then given an opportunity to gripe about an annoying situation. It is under this last condition that students have very revealing, outstanding patterns. Sometimes we probe best when we don't ask direct questions.

With the thought in mind about the sequence of inquiry, we looked at what students who were rated most and least disruptive said about annoyances.

It appeared that the disruptive student thought quite a bit more about being wrongfully accused or punished (p .06); and to some extent of the duplicity of others and of not getting what they wanted.

The non-disruptive student was bothered more by certain social obligations ($<.02$), such as being unable to end an undesirable conversation over the phone, and to some extent by closed-minded individuals.

It may be that the non-disruptive student is attempting to refine his social encounters or desires to be skillful in avoiding social encounters, or avoids being obvious, and hence, manages to be seen as least disruptive.

Issues in common to both disruptive and non-disruptive adolescents were distaste of unwanted school assignments, observing social injustice or being on the outs, unrewarded efforts, not understanding adult directions, and both groups in simply not responding to the question.

In any event, these findings do give us substantial clues as to the nature of disruptive students or at least to types of behavior that contribute to friction with the classroom teacher.

b. Teacher-Pupil Interaction.

In one instance we asked a teacher to rate two different class sections. She claimed to have a very difficult last period section. From the students' overall survey solutions and to some extent from their self description, the students tested out as more frisky.

However, the teacher's own rating indicated the last period students were <u>less</u> disruptive. The initial thought was to dismiss the teacher's rating as invalid. One could say for example the teacher felt worn or ineffective with this difficult group and sent them on with "gravy" rating. (A

re-check of the teacher's rating scale with another group of teachers proved to hold up). The teacher as a rater found a similar proportion of disruption as other teachers.

It was then thought that there was something unusual in the students she rated as disruptive as compared with other classes. This teacher seemed to find disruptive students among those who during a teaching gap situation (a dragging lesson) raised topics for discussion as opposed to routine or procedural questions. In contrast, the other teachers found these same students among the less disruptive (main effect ($p < .05$) and interaction effect of borderline sign (p between .10 and .05)*.

Could it be then that this teacher had some particular style where (on one level) she might not have preferred her students to raise issues or say certain issues were "disruptive" to her trend of thought? (Her last period class did raise fewer topics).

This is not far from Getzel's & Jackson's[5] finding where teachers showed less acceptance of highly creative adolescent youngsters than those who were intelligent but not so creative.

In any event, there is an indication that disruption may be relative to the style of the teacher and/or the behavior of the student, along with other considered aspects of disruption.

An eventual consideration would be to see if one can match the teacher's style with the student's approach for

*A transformation of Log (X +1) on the teacher's rating brought down variability for analysis purposes.

classroom harmony. This is common approach amongst guidance counselors in selecting sections for their students and resembles the U.C.L.A. experimental plan whereby teaching styles are being matched with student learning styles.

c. Achievement and Disruption.

Although there was an attempt at brevity and easy language in the survey, there were students who had difficulty in filling out the forms. One group of teenagers largely referred through the court to a guidance clinic had trouble reading the 8 questions; some disruptive suburban students took almost an hour filling out the form, apparently tense over obviously poor writing skills.

This certainly points out that underachievement, at least in language skills, in an import factor in disruption. Similarly, Cloward and Ohlin[3] suggest that cultural lack of opportunity in fulfilling potential leads to delinquent behavior.

We also must recognize that a survey asks for conventional written answers, and we are studying those who act out against similar conventions. Although a cursory analysis of the survey shows no lack of responsiveness to questions, among disruptive students this language problem can be eased by presenting the situations and recording solutions orally.

d. Survey as a Clinical Probe.

On occasions, the survey validates acting out behavior on the clinical level. It seems to pick up problems in extremes, but not if a student is very evasive or tries to give overly conforming answers.

A dramatic example of impulsiveness was given by a school fire setter (aged 14) who, when asked a question of what he would think to ask a teacher during a boring lesson, replied, "The student asked a man teacher what he thought about the football game that following weekend or if it was a lady he got into some mischief". When questioned about what he expected from the remark, he admitted he would like to see the class laugh and was looking for excitement. A year later, after close working with a teacher, being put on probation for car stealing and seeming to settle down, he was more circumspect in replying to the survey question (said, "no reaction") and showed more independence in answering adverse situations. Other comments suggested a style where he might get into trouble as a situation was breaking up, much as the kid who gives the fatal quip going out the door.

In all, the survey has value as a probe, leading us to pertinent questions, so we know more of the teenager style or approach.

* * *

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Table A or Slide A

SITUATIONAL SURVEY

1. As a class was dragging through a long lesson, a student thought of asking the teacher something off the subject. What did the student think of or ask the teacher?

2. A youth finds he's (she's) often pegged or noticed in ways that do not seem to fit him. He (She)

3. A student makes up his (her) mind to act tough so no one can take advantage of him. His teacher knows how he's playing it, but doesn't care. The Student

4. After noticing his (her) parents don't agree on how late he should stay out, he wonders how he could convince one parent to allow him to stay out later. He (She)

5. A student finds that he (she) got caught for doing something another student got away with. He (She)

6. A young man (woman) is asked by a friend to meet some of his buddies. They're a lively bunch and when he meets them he can't seem to catch on to their kind of talk. He (She)

7. A parent asks a young man (woman) to finish up what he's doing and he has no idea of where to begin. The young man (woman)

8. Give some examples of other annoying situations.

TABLE OR SLIDE D

TABLE: Unsolicited reasons for continued disruption by 35 youths

Percentage of Reasons	Themes
28	A. Not stop until one is given advice, removed, punished, etc.
17	B. Not concerned how others react, even if a pretense may be recognized.
14	C. Has to find out one is not making an impression or one's manner doesn't ring true.
9	D. Lack of teacher's response means no opposition.
9	E. Showing one is unafraid of acting defiant.
6	F. Has a year of defiance with a particular teacher.
6	G. Until the teacher is concerned.
6	H. Until one gains attention.
Additional Comments	Until one confuses others whether the act is for real or not.
(6)	Until one gains an effect.
	etc.